St. Cosmas Aitolos

Constantine Cavarnos

Source: *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 10:4/66, pp. 189-94.

St. Cosmas Aitolos (1714-1779) is undoubtedly the greatest missionary of modern Greece and may with good reason be called the father of the modern Greek nation. He played a role of supreme importance in the moral and religious awakening and enlightenment of the Greeks during the second half of the eighteenth century, and thus more than anyone else inaugurated the modern Greek era. Cosmas was leading a life of spiritual endeavor at the Monastery of

Philotheou on the Holy Mountain of Athos when he felt called by God to undertake the mission of regenerating his fellow Christians. The Greeks had fallen into great ignorance, and this saint believed (as did Socrates and Plato) that ignorance meant ungodliness and perdition. Education, enlightenment was needed. After having lived on Mount Athos for seventeen years, he sought and obtained the consent of his elders in 1760 to leave the monastery and go to Constantinople, there to obtain a permit to preach from the Patriarch. At Constantinople he met the Patriarch Seraphim (1757-1761), who, upon learning of Cosmas' desire and seeing his zeal, appointed him a "Preacher of the Nation" and gave him a written permit to preach throughout the Greek world.

Eastern Orthodox monasticism has always flourished in the desert, in the quiet of the wilderness, and has looked upon seclusion as one of the necessary conditions for the spiritual progress of the monk. It has regarded the monk's entry into the world as fraught with serious dangers. Aitolos' decision to leave the monastery and return to the world in order to preach did not result from his feeling that this standpoint was wrong. In one of his sermons he stresses his belief that a monk must live far from the world if he is to achieve salvation. He reconciled this stand with his own abandonment of monastic seclusion by saying that he was willing to sacrifice himself for the salvation of his brethren and that perhaps God's mercy would save him: "My brethren, I act wrongly in this regard, but as our race has fallen into ignorance, I said, 'Let Christ lose me, one sheep, and gain the others.' Perhaps God's mercy and your prayers will save us, too." One recalls here St. Paul's statement: "I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for the sake of my brethren" (Rom. 9:3). Only a man truly called to become an Apostle could be so disposed and make such a remark. It is to be noted that the Greeks have regarded St. Cosmas Aitolos as an *Isapostolos*, a "Peer of the Apostles."

His mission as an itinerant preacher began when he was forty-six years of age and continued until the time of his martyrdom at the hands of the Turks in 1779. For twenty years Cosmas traveled throughout the Greek mainland and the Dodecanese and Ionian Islands, preaching and establishing schools. He addressed large audiences, mostly outdoors, explaining to them the basic doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy, dissuading the people from wickedness, exhorting them to lead a godly life, stressing the need for instruction in the true Faith, and establishing schools in many villages and towns. From one of his letters, written shortly before his martyrdom, we learn that he established two hundred "common" or elementary schools and ten "Greek" or higher schools. Moreover, he gave away books by the Church Fathers and catechisms, baptismal basins, prayer-ropes, and little crosses, which he persuaded the well-to-do to provide him for free distribution to the Christians.

Cosmas' sermons were exceedingly effective. They brought about an immediate and profound inner transformation in his listeners. Not only the Christians, but Moslems also regarded him as a saint because of his inspiring sermons, his impeccable character, and the miraculous events

which occurred at many places that he visited. His sermons, together with his ability as a leader and organizer, enabled him to found the large number of schools that we have noted.

Apart from some personal letters, the saint left no writings. His sermons were always extemporaneous. What we have of his teaching has been recorded by ardent Christians who followed him in his journeys. The recorded sermons have been given the name *Didachai*, "Teachings," a term that brings to mind the early Christian manual entitled *Didache of the Twelve Apostles* and reveals the deep reverence with which Cosmas' sermons have been regarded. The *Didachai* of Cosmas were read in the churches, both during his lifetime and after his death, for the edification of the congregations. A good many sermons by Cosmas were probably recorded, but only a small number has come down to us. A painstaking recent researcher, Archimandrite Sophronios Papakyriakou, has brought together nine *Didachai* in his book, *Cosmas the Aitolian, Holy Martyr and Peer of the Apostles: Didachai, Letters, and Martyrdom.***1** This is the largest collection of St. Cosmas' *Didachai* thus far to appear in print.

The language he used to convey his message was the demotic, spoken Greek. He chose this language so that all who listened, both the old and young, the literate and the illiterate, could understand him without any difficulty. His manner of expression, reflecting his personality, was characterized by great simplicity, directness, warmth, charm, and serenity. Of Aitolos' sermons one may say what the Apostle Paul says of his own: "My speech and my preaching are not with the plausible words of human wisdom, but in demonstration and of power…"**2**

His teaching is based explicitly on the Holy Scriptures, particularly the New Testament, and on the writings of the Greek Fathers. Both from his biography and his sermons it is manifest that he aságned the highest importance to the study of Scripture and the works of the Church Fathers and that he studied both assiduously. From his life we discover that he sought to find the will of God regarding his planned choice of vocation by consulting the Divine Scriptures. We read also that he studied the Greek Fathers and distributed their works to those who could read or who promised to learn to read. In the *Didachai* we find the following very revealing passages as well as others similar to them: "Studying the Holy and Sacred Gospels, I found many and varied ideas, which are all pearls, diamonds, treasures, wealth, joy, delight, eternal life." "What I have said, my brethren, are not my own statements, but those of the Holy Spirit, taken from Holy Scripture." "We leave aside, my brethren, the prattling of the impious, the heretics, and the atheists, and say only what the Holy Spirit has illumined the holy Prophets, Apostles, and Fathers of the Church to write." "The Holy Spirit illumined firstly the holy Prophets, and they wrote the Divine Scripture; secondly, It illumined the holy Apostles; and thirdly, It has illumined the holy Fathers, and they have explained the books of our Church, in order that we may know how to conduct ourselves."

St. Cosmas proclaimed the superiority of Orthodoxy over all the other faiths. "I have searched the depths of wisdom," he says. "This I have truly come to realize, that all the Faiths are sham, only the Faith of the Orthodox Christians is sound and holy Rejoice that you are Orthodox Chris tian and weep and mourn for the unbelievers and the heretics, who walk in the dark."

Remarkably consistent and clear cut, Aitolos' teaching is focused on the means whereby man may achieve salvation. His preoccupation with establishing schools sprang from this fundamental religious concern. Education as envisaged by him should have as its chief aim to convey sound religious knowledge and lead to pious living. "The school," he remarks, "opens churches, the school opens monasteries." "It is at school that we learn what God is, what the angels are, what the demons, paradise, hell, virtue, vice, the soul and the body are."

The closely related problem of a well-qualified, educated priesthood comes up in his sermons. Aitolos stresses that the priest bears a heavy responsibility for the moral and spiritual state of the Christians who have been entrusted to him and will be held accountable for them on the day of Judgment. He who wants to become a priest must be a person of great purity and must be properly educated, so that he may be able to explain the Gospels and the rest of the Scriptures to the faithful. He should be ordained after reaching the age of thirty. Consonant with his vocation, the priest must not occupy himself with secular matters, but must always have his mind turned to things spiritual.

St. Cosmas indicates the practices through which man may fare well in this life and attain blessedness in the life to come. Of greatest importance are repentance, confession, fasting, prayer, humility, and love of God and one's neighbor. He especially emphasizes humility and love. "The Christian," he says, "needs two wings in order to soar upward and attain paradise: humility and love." Humility is angelic, whereas pride is diabolic. The one leads to paradise; the other, to hell. Concerning love of God and of man, he emphasizes that without this love salvation is impossible. In connection with love of our fellow man, the saint particularly enjoins almsgiving as a concrete and important manifestation of such love. He remarks: "I have a loaf of bread to eat, while you do not; love tells me: Do not eat it alone, but give some to your brethren and you eat the rest. I have clothes; love tells me: Give one to your brother and you wear the other one." Cosmas reproaches those who live by exploitation and injustice, asserting that they are doomed to perdition unless they repent and change their ways.

From his statements on prayer, which he also emphasizes, it is clear that the saint was familiar with the great Byzantine tradition of mysticism known as *hesychasm* and that he practiced the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy upon me." He enjoins upon his listeners the practice of this prayer at all times.

His frequent remarks concerning God and man are noteworthy. He speaks of God as all light, all joy, all goodness, all mercy, all love. The attribute of God that he stresses above all others is love. "God," says Aitolos, "has many and diverse names: He is called Light, and Life, and Resurrection, and the Way. However, His chief name is and is said to be love." Thus both in the ethical and in the theological teaching of Cosmas love is central.

Man, the individual, is asserted to be more precious than the whole world. Man's worth comes from his psyche or soul, which is immaterial and immor tal and chiefly constitutes him. The body is but the garment of the psyche. It is the psyche that sees, hears, talks, acquires knowledge, and gives life to the body. When the psyche withdraws from the body, the body disintegrates. Cosmas' statements about the human soul are at times strikingly reminiscent of Plato's. However, he is not an adherent of Platonism, which denies that the body is a part of human nature and believes that after death the souls of the righteous will live forever without bodies. At the end of time, Cosmas teaches, "God will resurrect all of mankind, with the souls and bodies."

The saint stresses that it is proper for the psyche to rule and for the body to obey. One is truly a man (*anthropos*) when this relationship holds. When the order is inverted and the psyche becomes a slave of the body, one should no longer be called a man but an animal.

For Cosmas there is no abyss separating man from God. God is present everywhere and distinctly in the human heart. Also, there is nothing in the nature of man that divides one man from another, but rather there is a unity of mankind. By virtue of the fact that all men have come from the same father and mother, Adam and Eve, "we are brothers; only our Faiths separate us."

From his belief in the unity of mankind, as well as from his deep Chris tian love, springs Cosmas' profound concern for the good of the whole of mankind. In one of his sermons he says, "If it were possible for me, my brethren, to ascend to the sky and cry with a loud voice and preach to the whole world and say that only our Christ is the Son and Logos of God and true God, and the life of all, I would do so. But inasmuch as I cannot do the great thing, I do this small one, and walk from place to place and teach my brethren according to my power."

Human history is not for him exclusively the product of man's actions; God takes part in it. Cosmas sees Divine Providence in such events as the appearance of Constantine the Great, which resulted in the rise of a great Christian kingdom, the Byzantine state and also in the fall of this kingdom to the Turks. "Three hundred years after the resurrection of Christ," he says, "God sent us St. Constantine and established a Christian kingdom; and the Christians had this kingdom for 1150 years. Then God took it from the Christians and brought the Turks, and gave it to them for our good; and the Turks now have it for 320 years. And why did God bring the Turks and not some other race? For our good, because the other nations would have caused detriment to our Faith." The "other races" which "would have caused detriment to our Faith" were the Europeans,

who, since the launching of the Crusades and the sacking of Constantinople by the Franks, were generally regarded by the Greeks as their worst enemies.

Aitolos saw the hand of Providence not only in Greece's past and present, but also in her future. He prophesied that Greece would be liberated and would have a glorious future. His prophecies in this regard stirred up the hopes of the Greeks and were one of the major factors that caused them to intensify their efforts at achieving Greece's independence.

The deep and extensive influence of St. Cosmas Aitolos did not come to an end when he died. It has continued uninterrupted to the present day through oral traditions of his teaching, miracles, and prophecies, which are preserved at many of the places where he preached, and through publications. The significant religious revival that took place in Greece during the middle of the nineteenth century was effected by three itinerant preachers: Phlamiatos, Lambropoulos, and Papoulakos, who were inspired by Aitolos' example. Today, among eminent Greeks who give evidence of the strong influence of St. Cosmas are Archimandrites Haralambos Vasilopoulos and Augustine N. Kantiotis. Vasilopoulos is Abbot of the Monastery of Petraki at Athens, editor of a religious monthly, and author of many edifying brochures and of the book *Cosmas Aitolos: The Greek Missionary*. Cosmas Aitolos, says Father Vasilopoulos in this work, "is one of the greatest Chris tian and national figures of Greece. He is the Missionary of the Balkans. He is something more: he is the Peer of the Apostles, as he has been named by the Church."**3** Kantiotis, the most remarkable contemporary Greek preacher, is author of many edifying books and editor of two religious periodicals. Among his books is one entitled *Saint Cosmas Aitolos,* which contains the life, teaching, prophecies, and *akoluthia* or divine office in honor of this saint. Father Kantiotis remarks in this book that "through his saintly life, his inspiring teaching, his miracles and prophecies, Cosmas benefited the Greeks more than anyone else during the eighteenth century."**4**

The influence of St. Cosmas Aitolos has not been limited to Greece, for he also preached in Constantinople and in Albania, and reports of him and his teaching spread to the other Balkan nations.

NOTES

1. *Kosma ton Aitolou Hieromartyros kai Isapostolou—Didachai, Epistolai, kai Martyrion*. Athens, 1953.
2. 1 Cor. 2:4.
3. Haralambos Vasilopoulos, *Kosmos Aitolos: ho Hellen Hierapostolos* (Athens. 1961), p. 10.
4. Augustine N. Kantiotis, *Kosmos ho Aitolos* (Athens, 1959), p. 8.